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ABSTRACT

An examination of a year's worth of editorial cartoons portraying the U.S. hostage crisis in Iran indicates a surprising lack of coverage or treatment of the deposed Shah and his subsequent admission into the United States as factors precipitating the crisis. Throughout the crisis, cartoonists focused on providing readers with some insight into the essential nature and motivation of Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian revolution. Khomeini was thematically portrayed as a clever manipulator of the media on which Americans were so dependent, as degrader or humiliator of the United States, and as being insane to the point of blind self-destruction. Like the failure to develop the Shah issue, the attribution of madness theme denies legitimacy to the embassy takeover, reducing it to an act without reason or rationale. A fourth theme portrayed Khomeini as hypocrite or false spiritual leader, given his secular actions, although the basis for these derogations may be based on implicitly ethnocentric and Christian religious beliefs. During this period, cartoonists borrowed the highly visible symbols of the crisis in order to secure analogical connections to other issues in the minds of cartoon readers, which may have ultimately trivialized or at least desensitized the crisis. Nevertheless, these cartoons offered audiences "the satisfaction of pretended insight," not necessarily the truth, but a palatable version of reality demanded by a mass readership enduring a crisis of purpose and in deep need of unity and reassurance. (Copies of cartoons selected from the 1 year sample may be obtained from the author.) (HTH)

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THE SATISFACTION OF PRETENDED INSIGHT:

THE IRANIAN CRISIS IN SELECTED U.S. EDITORIAL CARTOONS

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The Iranian crisis of 1979-1981 remains for many Americans a collage of vivid yet painful images: those first photographs of blindfolded American diplomats being herded by Iranian "students"; Iranian guards carrying trash hammock-like in an American flag from the captured embassy; the nightly TV news from Tehran featuring a sea of angry faces denouncing Carter, the Shah and the United States; the charred skeletons of men and machines, horrible wreckage of the abortive rescue attempt.

The "picture" of what was going on in Iran was conveyed to the American people by a wide variety of mass media: newspapers, news magazines, TV, radio and film. How these media covered this event and the rhetorical implications of that coverage have been the subject of several recent studies.[1] Yet there has been little substantive research into one major communicative form which delivered the Iranian hostage crisis, and various interpretations of the event, into the homes of millions of Americans via the daily newspapers. I refer to that staple of the op-ed page, the editorial cartoon.

Increasingly the editorial cartoon has become the subject of communication studies into the nature of political campaigns,[2] the evolution of social issues within a culture,[3] and the cartoon as barometer of changes in the political climate.[4] This paper will focus

on editorial cartoon treatment of the late Iranian hostage crisis in selected U.S. newspapers for an approximate one year period. In large part the cartoon sample is part of a larger body of data used by the author in previous research into the editorial cartoon.[5]

While the complete body of implications of these cartoons for communication studies, particularly intercultural studies, falls beyond the intent of this short paper, I will attempt to discuss what I feel are some of the salient issues represented by an examination of these cartoons: issues such as the potential of cartoons for providing a convenient frame for a complex event, the cartoon as a highly formulaic art, the ethnocentrism implicit in cartoon portrayals of foreign ideologies and personalities, and the cartoon as symbolic aggression.

CARTOON TREATMENT OF THE SHAH

While an examination of cartoons featuring the Iranian crisis produces many recurring themes or clusters of issues that may be discussed, the first theme I wish to discuss is notable by the dearth of attention it received. It is an important theme largely by its omission, not by the frequency with which it appeared in editorial cartoons.

As historian Theodore White has noted in his discussion of the events leading up to the Iranian takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran,[6] it is impossible to understand that event without an

appreciation of the role of the deposed Shah in those proceedings. Indeed, the capture of the U.S. facility, goes most interpretations, was promoted at least in part by traditional American support of the Pahlavi regime, and the eventual U.S. acceptance of the Shah into this country for medical reasons.

It is somewhat surprising to find, then, that the issue of the Shah finds little coverage or treatment in the cartoon sample examined. For example, of the 244 cartoons in this sample, only 18 feature the Shah either by reference or portrayal. Those few cartoons which do feature the Shah are surprisingly sympathetic portraits of a pariah, a man without a country condemned to exile until death by cancer will overtake him. The Shah's status as outcast is underscored in Wayne Stayskal's humorous insinuation that even the conch shell has an opinion about the Shah's suitability to the beach he walks (figure 1). Paul Conrad of the Los Angeles Times parodies the Shah's situation as if he were a "lucky winner" going abroad, when we really know that he is not a tourist by choice (figure 2). Conrad also offered readers a cartoon featuring a vengeful Khomeini surrounded by glass jars containing organs the Shah had removed in his battle against cancer. Khomeini complains, "We object to this piecemeal approach to the return of the Shah" (figure 3). As a final illustration, cartoonist Don Wright offers a poignant commentary on the Shah as a peripatetic, a man genuinely welcome nowhere on this planet (figure 4).

Of course there are probably several explanations for the

largely sympathetic treatment of the Shah by the pens of major American cartoonists; certainly there is the fact of his deteriorating medical condition, and of course the official administration position that the Shah is a loyal friend of the American cause. Yet my argument is that the "Shah factor" is underdeveloped by American cartoonists precisely because it is seen as an Iranian-generated issue, and to give it credence is to indirectly support the villainous Khomeini. To provide wide discussion of the "Shah factor" is to grant legitimacy to an Iranian justification for the takeover of the embassy. To associate yourself with the argument that the Shah might indeed be an international criminal, and that the U.S. has supported a hated totalitarian regime, is to accept national blame for the crisis, and acknowledge that we have provoked the Iranian people into an act of violence against our own diplomats. The response by Iranian "students" in occupying the embassy takes on a veneer of justification if one looks too deeply into the history of oppressive acts reasonably attributed to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

As further evidence of this hypothesis let us look at how American cartoonists treated two noted Americans who dared suggest that the Shah was at the heart of our troubles in Iran. For example, former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark's visit to Iran as an investigator of charges against the U.S. government was typically framed as an instance of giving aid and comfort to an enemy. Even cartoonists associated with liberal ideology like Patrick Oliphant portray Clark as a dupe of the Khomeini regime (figure 5). Another

cartoonist sees Clark more concerned about the rights of the victimizer than those of the victims (figure 6).

Senator Edward Kennedy is treated only slightly less harshly by cartoonists as a result of his public statements denouncing the Shah and questioning continued U.S. support for the Pahlavi regime. Herblock of the Washington Post retreats to Aesop's fables in insinuating that Kennedy's pursuit of the "Shah issue" will distract candidate Kennedy from the path leading to the coveted Democratic party nomination (figure 7). Oliphant also sees Kennedy's preoccupation with the Shah as political stupidity tantamount to the spectre of the Chappaquiddick tragedy (figure 8). Paul Conrad underscores the political ammunition Kennedy is providing candidate Carter by supporting a position on the Shah most closely associated with the hated Khomeini; in the eyes of some Americans Kennedy becomes an Ayatollah figure himself (figure 9).

In summary, then, I believe that one of the major ways in which selected cartoonists communicated the reality of the hostage crisis to an American readership was by de-legitimizing the position that the Shah was an important factor in understanding the reasons behind the embassy takeover and the strong hatred of the U.S. by the Iranian revolutionaries. By refusing to grant significance to graphic discussions of the Shah in their cartoons, cartoonists exemplified the potential of cartoons to contribute to agenda-setting, especially agenda-setting by omission.[7] Instead cartoonists focused on other explanations for the Iranian takeover, explanations less threatening

to an American readership and more derisive of a central figure in the hostage crisis, the Ayatollah Khomeini.

THE CARTOON AS FRAME

As I have argued in previous research, one of the major potential functions of the editorial cartoon for readers is as a "frame" or condensation of a complex event into an easily comprehended image or metaphor.

> Editorial artists must achieve a concrete understanding, a Verstehen, with the reader almost immediately. To achieve this the cartoonist must concoct imagery that is at once compelling and powerful, drawing frequently from potent symbols within the political and cultural mythology.
>
> This condensed nature of the political cartoon equips it for the reduction of complex issues into single visual designs. The cartoon functions, as Gombrich has written, to "give us the satisfaction of pretended insight." By reducing a complex issue or event to a simple metaphorical form, the political cartoon provides the reader with an attractive illusion of understanding that can serve as a touchstone for subsequent thought or action.[8]

The situation in Iran would certainly be a prime example of an event

which would place American news consumers in a highly dependent relationship with the major mass media. If the topic of media coverage is inflation or some phenomenon with which the news consumer has had some experience, he or she can compare news offerings with the yardstick of personal experience, rejecting some ideas, accepting others. But the situation in Iran, as with many items of foreign news, places the American news consumer at a distinct disadvantage since most Americans in 1979 had little personal knowledge of the history or culture of Iran. Editorial cartoonists as one species of mass communicators are in a unique position to provide their audiences with attractive distillations of the events and personalities making up the drama of the hostage crisis. Nowhere is this reality better demonstrated than in cartoon treatment of the central Iranian figure in the hostage drama, the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Throughout the painfully evolving crisis distinct patterns or recurring themes emerge as American cartoonists try to provide their readers some insight into the essential nature and motivations of the unlikely leader of the Iranian revolution. I will but briefly note several of the minor frames for Khomeini, spending more time developing other frames which are revealing of cultural bias by the cartoonists.

In a highly media conscious society it is not surprising that one early attempt to frame Khomeini centers on the suspicion that he is a clever manipulator of media, especially the television medium to which Americans are so addicted for their nightly news fix

(figures 10, 11). This frame was no doubt fueled by several events including increased American awareness of the staged nature of the large Tehran demonstrations which occupied our nightly TV news, as well as the use of interviews of the hostages as propaganda vehicles for the revolution.

Secondly, Khomeini is often portrayed as the degrader or humiliator of the U.S., a relationship symbolized by several cartoonists in strikingly similar fashion. Khomeini has Carter (and the U.S.) "jumping through the hoop," submitting to his every whim (figures 12-14). In a cartoon drawn after the election of Ronald Reagan, cartoonist Auth suggests that this period of humiliation is finally to be ended (figure 15).

A third predominant frame used by cartoonists to provide an American readership with some understanding of this cryptic leader was the attribution of madness or insanity to the Iranian leader. The theme of Khomeini as madman was developed with both great humor and dark analogy. Auth and Oliphant, for example (figures 16, 17) utilize the imagery of self-immolation to express the message that Khomeini is willingly risking self-destruction; the suicide being, in our culture at least, a lunatic by definition. Oliphant resorts to a colloquial expression for madness (carpet chewing) to insinuate Khomeini's reaction to the election of Ronald Reagan (figure 18). Mike Peters resorts to several commonplaces in American culture to continue the madness theme. In one cartoon Khomeini is compared to the prototypical crazy used car dealer who populates late night TV

commercials, and in another Khomeini reclines on the psychiatrist's couch, caught in the paradox of his lunacy (figures 19, 20). Finally, in one of the starkest cartoons illustrating the madness theme, the Chicago Tribune's Dick Locher offers a graphic argument that Khomeini is but yet another madman who will leave the world a legacy of death and horror (figure 21).

As a tangential note, there may be in the assertions of madness here some cultural linking of extreme age and mental deficiency. In the Oliphant cartoon and others there is at least the intimation that Khomeini's madness is linked to his old age, and the supposed deterioration implicit to old age (figure 22). Even though there have been strides in recent years to eliminate stereotyping of the aged in the American mass media, there can be little doubt that so-called "ageism" is still a strong undercurrent in American cultural life.[9] Although there is recent evidence that the American public is becoming intolerant of cartoon caricatures which portray the elderly in stereotypic ways, an exception could be expected in the case of caricatures of a non-American villain.[10] Khomeini is invalidated as a leader because he is old and supposedly subject to the deficiencies of the elderly.

The attribution of the madness theme, like the failure to develop the Shah issue, denies legitimacy to the embassy takeover. The takeover becomes in the American public mind, as fostered by the editorial cartoon, an act without reason or rationale, leaving one to conclude it is either the work of evil personified or the fruit of a madman's delusions.

My final discussion of attempts by cartoonists to frame Khomeini for their readership concerns cartoonist perceptions of the Ayatollah as a religious leader. Of course, Khomeini's persona as both a political and religious leader is frequently under attack by the American cartoonists in this sample. Such symbolic agression is the essence of caricature and may reasonably be thought of as a substitute for our national inability to "punish" the Iranian leader in more traditional ways.[11] At issue in this cluster of cartoons is not the reality of Khomeini as spiritual leader for millions of Shi'ite Moslems, but the legitimacy of his religious credentials given his secular actions as head of the Islamic revolutionary state. Khomeini as hypocrite or false spiritual leader is the frequent message of these cartoons, although the basis for these derogations of Khomeini may be based on implicitly Christian religious standards.

For example, Bob Englehart's cartoon (figure 23) underlines a point made by some Koranic scholars during the early months of the crisis; taking guests (U.S. diplomats) hostage violates Islamic law regarding the safety and security of guests, even guests who are enemies. Along a similar vein Bill Mauldin offers what is essentially an enthymematic[12] argument that Khomeini cannot be a true holy man since true holy men do not promote violent acts (figure 24). Tony Auth inverts traditional Christian epithets to make his point that the Ayatollah may traffic in the trappings of religion, but is still an aberration of religious doctrine (figures 25, 26).

Obviously, there is clearly a certain amount of ethnocentrism[13]

implicit in these highly negative portrayals of a representative of Islam, portrayals which reflect the Christian religious tradition within this country. Auth's cartoons and others (figure 27) judge Khomeini's actions with a yardstick of a Christian idealism which is not even practiced in Christian nations. The swift and violent justice of the revolutionary Islamic court must seem totally alien to a nation ambivalent on the issue of capital punishment and unused to swift punishment following conviction of a crime given the maze of appeals implicit to our legal system.

One remembers, for example, world horror (in the non-Islamic world) at the public execution a few years ago of a Saudi princess and her lover for the crime of adultery. While an American audience may be repulsed at the thought of a convicted thief losing a hand for his crimes, such revulsion is surely cultural not genetic. Attacks on Khomeini as religious leader may be similarly attributable to American popular distrust of religious traditions outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Khomeini as both secular and religious leader of a nation also violates American political traditions which prescribe clear separation of church and state.

HOSTAGE CRISIS AS FORMULA

There is one final, somewhat surprising discovery resulting from any examination of the editorial cartoons reacting to the Iranian crisis; this discovery involves the expropriation of the imagery,

symbols and popular vocabulary of the crisis for the purpose of offering commentary on issues sometimes very unrelated to the hostage crisis. I do not mean here simply that the Iranian crisis impinged on the domestic political agenda (figures 28, 29), an assertion that is but too obvious. What I mean instead is that cartoonists during this period (1979-1980) "borrowed" the highly visible symbols of the crisis in order to secure analogical connections to other issues in the minds of cartoon readers.

To illustrate this process let me digress with an example from the popular culture of this period. The term "Ayatollah" prior to the events in Iran was probably a cipher, a meaningless neologism for most Americans. Yet with national familiarity of the term comes a concrete understanding of it as a designation of the Iranian leader Khomeini and a small corps of other Iranian mullah.[5] "Ayatollah" comes to denote an individual; the term has utility as a simple denotative symbol. Yet as the crisis progresses and we gain even more information about this Khomeini person, the term begins to collect clusters of strong negative (for American audiences) emotional reactions. "Ayatollah" begins to resonate with powerful connotative meanings associated with the qualities or personality characteristics associated with the man Ayatollah Khomeini.

Thus in his nightly monologue comedian Johnny Carson can refer to New York Yankee team owner George Steinbrenner as "the Ayatollah Steinbrenner" and Carson's audience will catch his intended analogy,

an analogy between Khomeini's perceived dictatorial rule and the well known autocratic management style of the Yankee team owner.

Similarly, in more examples than can be offered here, many cartoonists came to use our national familiarity with the symbology of the Iranian crisis to make analogical connections. For example, Cartoonist Conrad suggests that the American people are being held hostage by Carter economic policies just as 52 diplomats are held by Iranian revolutionaries (figure 30). As noted earlier (figure 9), Edward Kennedy's "unpatriotic" remarks about the Shah earned him the most un-American designation possible--the status of Ayatollah clone. Tony Auth also suggests, in similar vein, that President Carter's stern condemnation of criticism of his policies as unpatriotic bears close resemblance to Khomeini's dismissal of any dissent as traitorous or the work of devils (figure 31).

The abortive rescue attempt of the hostages by a squadron of Navy helicopters, and the resultant imagery of the helicopters crashed in the desert, became grist for the cartoonists' mill in creating parallels between that tragedy and what cartoonists saw as other grand failures. Cartoonists Conrad, Locher, Stayskal and Auth all used the imagery of a stalled or crashed helicopters as the symbol of President Carter's troubles in his re-election bid (figures 32, 33).

Even the term <u>hostage</u> quickly transcends the literal reality of 52 Americans held captive in a foreign land to encompass more general associations of victimization in all its forms. For example, the

Philadelphia Inquirer's Auth argues for a parallel between the plight of the American hostages and the dark reality of a planet held hostage by the threat of nuclear holocaust (figure 34). Other examples of the expropriation of the hostage visual/verbal "vocabulary" are found in cartoons with less profound messages. In a cartoon syndicated nationally during the early spring tax season, Dick Locher rendered a typical American taxpayer being sternly advised by an I.R.S. agent that under occupation on his tax form he cannot put "hostage". Wayne Stayskal offered a cartoon featuring an errant husband sneaking home late at night to be met by a hostile wife who greets him with the line, "And just where were you being held hostage?" Still other cartoonists borrow the hostage vocabulary to comment on the delegate voting rights issue at the Democratic National Convention in August 1980 (figure 35).

These examples and others show that much of the symbolism of the hostage crisis, initially striking and provocative, quickly became diffused through application to a wide range of issues, some of which were totally unrelated to the crisis itself. In a sense the use of the hostage symbols by cartoonists is a reminder of the pressure faced by cartoonists to achieve instant recognition and understanding with their art, a practice which requires a formulaic verbal/visual vocabulary of highly recognizable imagery.

However, I believe one consequence of this diffusion of the hostage imagery is to ultimately trivialize or at least desensitize the crisis itself. The end result of this use of the hostage imagery is to

diminish the seriousness of the event itself, and to deflate the emotionality integral to this national trial.

DISCUSSION

Recent history has demonstrated that the hostage crisis in Iran produced changes and shock waves that are still being comprehended. On a large scale, the event presaged a destabilization of the Middle East that is still unfolding. The event undoubtedly contributed to the re-election failure of an incumbent U.S. president, itself an unusual event. Less grandly the crisis paved the way for a minor revolution in American television: the establishment of late night network news. Most relevant here, however, is the fact that the crisis revealed the potential vigor of that small corps of artists who comprise the syndicated editorial cartoonists in this country.

Exhibiting a unity of purpose that perhaps typifies the nationalism found during times of crisis, cartoonists provided their readers with trenchant definitions for the events and personalities in Iran. Perhaps more importantly cartoonists gave the American people avenues for venting hostilities that might otherwise have been turned into more violent expressions.

It is difficult to gauge the impact of the popular arts as vehicles for the expression of both hostility toward Iran and American national unity during the period of crisis. Certainly one may object to the ways patriotism itself was commercialized during the crisis (figure 36).

Yet the obscene bumper stickers, the Ayatollah dart boards, the ubiquitous yellow ribbons, the hostile pop songs (e.g., Bomb, Bomb Iran to the tune of the Beach Boys' classic Barbara Ann), T-shirts, and cartoons served important functions for a frustrated American public. The importance of the cartoons and other means of catharsis became vital when we realized, after the disastrous rescue attempt, "there was no way Americans could punish their Iranian tormentors."[14]

While a valid argument could be made for the position that Americans did not receive a balanced perspective of the crisis in the cartoons surveyed here, that finding should not be surprising. As the anthropologist Edward Hall noted almost thirty years ago in his Silent Language, the major benefit of studying a foreign culture is learning more about your own society. Similarly, the study of U.S. cartoonists portrayals of the Iranian hostage crisis tells us far more about the American people than it illuminates the crisis.[15]

The majority of cartoons examined in this study, a portion of which are offered as illustrations, conform to the dictum offered by E.H. Gombrich, noted scholar of caricature. Cartoons offer an audience "the satisfaction of pretended insight," not necessarily the truth, but a palatable version of reality demanded by a mass readership, in this case a national readership enduring a crisis of purpose and in deep need of unity and reassurance.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Robert C. Johnson, "'Blacks and Women': Naming American Hostages Released in Iran," Journal of Communication, 30 (1980), 58-63; Ernest G. Bormann, "A Fantasy Theme Analysis of the Television Coverage of the Hostage Release and the Reagan Inaugural," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 68 (1982), 133-145; Larry Haapanen, "The Iran and Afghanistan Crises and the 1980 Presidential Campaign," Western Speech Communication Convention 1981, San Jose, California.

[2] Alette Hill, "The Carter Campaign in Retrospect: Decoding the Cartoons," Semiotica, 23 (1978), 307-332; Michael A. DeSousa and Martin J. Medhurst, "Political Cartoons and American Culture: Significant Symbols of Campaign 1980," Studies in Visual Communication, 8 (1982), 84-97.

[3] Katherine Meyer, John Seidler, Timothy Curry, Adrian Aveni, "Women in July Fourth Cartoons: A 100 Year Look," Journal of Communication, 30 (1980), 21-29.

[4] For example, two studies which examined the impact of the Watergate Crisis on caricatures of Richard Nixon and Mary E. Wheeler and Stephen K. Reed, "Responses to Before and After Watergate Caricatures," Journalism Quarterly, 52 (1975), 134-136; Mitchel Goldman and Margaret Hagen, "The Forms of Caricature: Physiognomy

and Political Bias," Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication, 5 (1978), 30-36.

[5] Conclusions reported here are based on a study of 244 editorial cartoons treating the Iranian critis from the period Nov. 1, 1979 through Nov. 30, 1980. Cartoons were obtained from the Washington Post the Chicago Tribune, the Los Angeles Times and the Davis, California Enterprise. This cartoon sample included the work of 23 editorial cartoonists. For further information on the larger cartoon sample from which these cartoons were drawn see Martin J. Medhurst and Michael A. DeSousa, "Political Cartoons as Rhetorical Form: A Taxonomy of Graphic Discourse," Communication Monographs, 48 (1981), 197-236.

[6] Theodore H. White, America in Search of Itself: The Making of the President 1956-1980 (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), esp. pp. 11-22.

[7] "Political Cartoons and American Culture," p. 92.

[8] "Political Cartoons and American Culture," p. 93.

[9] Examples of research into U.S. media stereotyping of the elderly include selected articles in the Journal of Communication, 24 (Autumn 1974); or more recently Bradley S. Greenberg, Felipe Korzenny, and Charles S. Atkin, "Trends in the Portrayal of the Elderly," in Life on Television: Content Analysis of U.S. TV Drama, ed. Bradley S. Greenberg (Norwood, N.J.: ABLEX, 1980), pp. 23-33. A recent

article on "ageism" in advertising is Arnold Arluke and Jack Levin, "Second Childhood," Public Communication Review, 1 (1982), 21-25.

[10] For a discussion of the opposition by readers to early campaign cartoons using elderly stereotypes with candidate Ronald Reagan, see Jerry Adler, et.al., "The Finer Art of Politics," Newsweek, October 13, 1980, pp. 74-85.

[11] A brief discussion of the cartoon as symbolic aggression is found in "Political Cartoons and American Culture," pp. 91-92.

[12] For an elaboration of the cartoon as visual enthymeme see "Political Cartoons as Rhetorical Form," p. 220.

[13] A further discussion of the factors influencing the image of the Arab in the U.S. is found in G. Rachty, "The Arab Image in the American Media," World Media Conference, New York, 1980 as quoted in Alex S. Edelstein, Comparative Communication Research (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1982), pp. 87-88.

[14] White, p. 21.

[15] For an example of foreign cartoon treatment of American policies, see Yeshayahu Nir, "U.S. Involvement in the Middle East Conflict in Soviet Caricatures," Journalism Quarterly, 54 (1977), 697-702+726. Besides the availability of examples of non-American editorial cartoons in foreign newspapers, the monthly journalism publication World Press Review regularly features the work of editorial cartoonists around the world.

NOTE: Cartoons have been removed because of copyright restrictions. Copies may be obtained from the author of this paper.